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AUTHOR Katz, Lilian G.
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ABSTRACT

Four research-based principles offer guidance to educators aiming to facilitate young children's acquisition of communicative competence. These principles concern the effect of interaction on the development of competence; the necessity for content in interaction; the requirement that content be ecologically valid to participants; and the impact of reciprocity in interaction on interpersonal as well as communicative competence. Educational practices likely to help children develop competence involve the availability of opportunities for interaction; involvement of children in long-term projects; participation of children in mixed-age and mixed-competence groups; using the technique of "reflection" to let children know that their feelings are accepted and to encourage children to make their understandings and misunderstandings explicit; the teacher's role in modeling language use; opportunities for children to talk with other children about many subjects; and talking to children in a serious, authentic, non-artificial way. Practices likely to inhibit the development of competence include teacher-directed large-group instruction; premature formal whole-group instruction; bias in student/teacher interaction; overuse of interrogation as a teaching technique; allowing judgments of children's competence to influence response time allocated to children; focusing on language as an object of primary concern; and bribing reluctant children to speak. Improving educational practice is likely to require giving attention to: (1) teachers' comprehension of communicative competence; (2) detrimental customs and traditions in educational practice; and (3) institutional constraints on instruction. (RH)

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Fostering Communicative Competence in Young Children*

Lilian G. Katz, Ph. D.
College of Education
University of Illinois

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As can be seen from the papers in this issue, much new and valuable knowledge about the nature and nurture of communicative competence in young children is now available for those who work with them. This knowledge provides a basis for asking the questions: What educational practices facilitate or inhibit the development of communicative competence in young children? and How can practitioners acquire and strengthen facilitative practices or weaken irhibiting ones?

Four general principles on the basis of which appropriate practices for early childhood education can be derived are outlined. From these a set of practices that can be expected to facilitate the development of competence is outlined. These are followed by a list

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of fairly common practices that may inhibit its development. Finally we take up some points concerning how to help students in training as well as experienced teachers to acquire the practices discussed.

Principles Underlying Practices

The term 'principle' is used to here to refer to a generalization applicable to a wide range of situations which can serve as a decision-rule when making choices among possible ways of responding to them. Contemporary research on the acquisition of language and communicative competence suggests at least four principles on which to base the selection of educational practices.

A first principle is that the development of communicative competence is facilitated by interaction. Much contemporary research (e. g. Wells, 1981; Saville-Troike, 1982) lends weight to this deceptively simple principle. First it reminds us that mere exposure to language is not sufficient for children to acquire communicative competence. Secondly, it stimulates us to examine what kinds of interactions might be most facilitating on the one hand, or inhibiting on the other.

A second principle, which qualifies the first, is that interaction

requires content, i. e. communication cannot occur in a vacuum; something must be going on between the interactors about which they are communicating. This principle encourages us to examine issues about the content of interaction in early childhood educational settings. Furthermore it leads us to a third principle, namely that interaction is facilitated when the content is ecologically valid to the participants (Cazden, 1976). This principle suggests that facilitative interaction is most likely if the content of it is either embedded in the context (Saville-Troike, 1982), or if it is rich in associations for the children, vivid or imaginable and/or familiar to them. In other words, the activities of the children are related in meaningful ways to their own interests, perceptions and backgrounds, are rich in associations and are optimally familiar to them.

The fourth principle is that interpersonal as well as communicative competence is facilitated when the children experience others' responses to them as contingent upon their own. In this sense, conversation, which can be defined as strings of verbal responses in which each turn-taker's response is contingent upon the preceding one, is a model or a metaphor for the kinds of interactions required for the development of social and communicative competence.

With these principles as points of departure the two broad questions with which this paper began can be addressed.

Facilitative Practices

On the basis of the four principles outlined above it follows that an educational program for young children should provide ample opportunities for interaction. These should include individual adult-child and child-child conversations (McCartney, 1984), frequent opportunities for children to retrieve and explicate what they already know and care about, and the usual provision of opportunities for spontaneous dramatic play. The educational program should also include some semi-structured drama in which the teacher encourages children to take on certain roles by structuring the activity for them. One interesting example is of a teacher of five and six year olds who taught some of the children to operate a tape recorder and encouraged some of the them to take the role of news-reporters, giving interviews to other children who took the roles of 'respondents'. In such an activity the children can select their own news stories or if necessary the teacher can provide structure by suggesting that respondents play such roles as farmers, bus drivers, vicars, or other roles that have true salience to the particular children in the group. The teacher can then listen to the first few interviews recorded and suggest ways to sharpen questions in order to get better responses. The 'interviewers' can be encouraged to summarize their findings for their classmates. Such activities are within the range of abilities of many 5 and most 6 year olds, especially when they are given appropriate teacher guidance.

In a similar way, interaction is stimulated when children are

engaged in projects which require continuous work over a period of several days and even weeks. For example a group of four year olds began a project by making a simple bed for a 'sick' doll. They subsequently added a hospital 'ward', collected a variety of first aid and medical equipment, constructed an 'ambulance' and made a 'stretcher' with which to carry the sick to and from the ambulance, and so forth. All parts of the project were made by the children from scrap materials. Their constructions were large enough for them to get inside of and play in. Over a period of weeks the children interacted with each other and with the teacher about such matters as construction materials and methods, how to make parts of the ambulance strong enough to play in, how to construct a stretcher and how to obtain the bandages, thermometer, stethoscope and other medical equipment. Projects of this kind require interaction for planning and discussion of various aspects of the work of construction. Once the construction is completed the children can take on the relevant roles of the real life actors (such as ambulance driver, doctor, patient, etc.). The kind of continuous involvement these projects require ensures content which is familiar, and ecologically valid to the children in that it deals with their ongoing project work. The content is also recollective in that children are reconstructing in their school elements of the world they have observed outside of it.

In terms of program activities another approach that deserves consideration is placing children in mixed age and mixed competence groups. A number of parameters of the "mix" must be taken into account (Freedman, 1982; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1984). Research

suggests that the age range in the mixture and the proportion of older to younger children requires careful examination. It has been suggested that a number of pedagogical as well as logistical purposes can be served by mixing the ages within groups or classes in such a way that the oldest (e.g. 5 years) and youngest (e. g. 3 years) in a class represent about 15% each of the total enrollment. In such classes the youngest have more mature linguistic as well as social models to emulate, the eldest have opportunities for teaching and leadership responsibilty, and the middle age group might be in the best position to consolidate gains they have just made on many developmental fronts (Katz, in press). As yet no definitive experiments indicating the optimum range or proportion of age mixes have been reported.

Another practice that can facilitate the development of communicative competence is called 'reflection of feelings'. This teaching technique is used (judiciously) when a child seems unable or unwilling to communicate her own feelings to the adult. For instance in the case a child new to the class who resists pressure to join in ongoing activities the teacher might say "Perhaps you want to just watch (from over here) for a while, do you?" The use of this technique has two important segments. First, the adult makes the very best guess she* can about what the child feels or wants. Secondly, when the teacher puts her best guess to the child she adds the tag "do you?" or "don't you?" or "isn't it?", as appropriate, in order to invite the child to correct her incase her guess is wrong. The tag question is important because it minimizes

* a single gender for teachers is used for convenience

the likelihood that the child will feel "boxed in" by the adult's interpretation of his or her feelings, or that the child will believe that he/she ought to have the feeling the teacher has verbalized. However the main purpose of the tag end of the statement is to encourage the child to respond with corrective feedback if the adult's guess is wrong.

A similar practice of great potential use with young children is called 'reflection of thinking'. It is assumed here that one of the major functions of a teacher is to uncover how the learner understands relevant phenomena so that she will know what to cover (see Glaser, 1984). In other words, the teacher must uncover the learner's construction of the relevant phenomena in order to make the best possible decisions about instruction. One method of uncovering a child's thinking is to make the best possible guess about what the child is thinking, what confuses him or her, and to reflect it back (e.g. It's the color you have trouble with, isn't it?) in such a way that the child is encouraged to make his or her own confusions explicit. Indeed, teachers of young children should teach them fairly early to say things to them like: "I don't get it", "I'm lost", "Can you go over it again please?", "Can you give me another example...?" and so forth. Socialization in such strategies increases the likelihood that the child can keep the teacher informed of his or her understandings and misunderstandings of relevant phenomena, and it is assumed here that the more informed the teacher is about where the learner is, the more likely she is to make good decisions about what to do next.

Another practice that stimulates and strengthens communicative competence is to provide children with phrases, and to model the tone in which they might be spoken. This approach has been illustrated in a situation in which one child complains to the teacher that another will not let her have a turn with the tricycle (Katz, 1984b). In such a case the teacher can say to the complaining child something like "It might help to say to (the other child) 'I've been waiting for a long time, and I really want a turn" adding "and if that doesn't work, come back and we'll think of something else to try." The teacher models a tone of moderate but firm assertiveness the child can imitate. Or if the two children in the tricycle situation are not very articulate or have few appropriate phrases for heated conversation the teacher can use the technique called Speaking-FOR-Children in which the adult speaks to each child on behalf of the other. The teacher makes the best guess she can about what each child is feeling and expresses it to the other on his or her behalf, and in fact carries on the conversation on behalf of both participants. This gives the children involved in the dispute an opportunity to observe how they themselves might be able to use verbal behavior to address the problem at hand.

Another practice often neglected by conscientious teachers is to encourage child-child communication about a wide variety of subjects. It is not uncommon for young children to seek their teachers' reactions and comments to their work and their tales from home. If the teacher responds, for example, by saying something like "Be sure to tell George what you just told me....he's

interested in X too", or similar suggestions about other children as sources or recipients of information, the frequency of child-child communication will increase substantially.

Finally, another overlooked practice likely to facilitate children's communicative competence is the teacher herself as a model of articulateness. Although, as Cazden (1976) points out, there is typically too much teacher talk in the classroom, this may not be quite as much the case for the early childhood programs as for junior grade classes. What may be more problematic in the preschool or nursery class is making teacher talk genuine and authentic. Teacher talk in preschool contexts is very often sweet, kind and nice (referred to elsewhere as the 'nobody home syndrome' (see Katz, 1977)) or merely directive. Teachers might be encouraged to speak to children as though they are real people, albeit with limited experiences and vocabularies; but they are not pets or dolls and should be spoken to seriously. Children may also be helped if teachers explicate their own thinking to the children more fully than they usually do. For example they might let children know how they have been thinking through some plans for activities or their thoughts on how the equipment might be moved or rearranged, and even solicit the children's input on some of these matters.

Inhibiting Practices

It follows from much of the discussion above that teacher directed lessons presented to a whole group of 20 or more young children at

a time would minimize opportunities for conversational interaction and therefore would be very likely to have inhibitory effects. Such activities are to be distinguished from whole group activities during which story reading, story telling, and music are offered.

It was suggested as a principle of practice that children should be able to perceive responses to them as contingent upon their own behavior or feelings. If children have frequent experience in which their own status has no effect on significant adults they must eventually learn to feel helpless - for in fact in such situations they are helpless. One of the dangers of introducing formal whole-group instruction to children too early (e.g. before about six years old) is that many of the children in the group may have frequent experiences in which their own understandings/misunderstandings are not responded to by the teacher, and in which they therefore feel 'out of it'. In such cases children have no choice but to interpret the teacher's behaviour as a sign of their own incompetence. Older children and adults are more able to attribute such situations to deficiencies of the teacher!

Crahay (1980) has shown that within a typical preschool class only about five or six of the children (those who are most articulate) are receiving most of the teacher's verbal interaction, suggesting that teachers tend to engage in greater amounts of interaction with those children who have the greatest verbal fluency and ability. This phenomenon is one of a class of interaction patterns that can be characterized as a recursive cycle. The concept of the recursive

cycle refers to the fact that having a given characteristic or behavior such as high verbal ability stimulates responses from others which lead to strengthening it. Thus the more verbally able a child is, the more verbal input he or she receives from adults, and the more verbally able the child becomes. If the child's verbal abilities are weak, busy teachers and other adults tend to pass over them or to see them as wanting to be left alone. In the light of how busy teachers are, the tendency to avoid interactions in which the child can be expected to hesitate or stammer is understandable; this causes such a child to fail to progress as fast as others. The recursive cycle suggests that whatever behavior or tendencies one has, the chances are that one will get more of them! One of the implications of the concept of the recursive cycle is that the child cannot break the cycle by himself. The intervenion of the teacher or other adult is required to break and thus change the cycle that the child is caught in. As long as teachers allow such cycles to develop, the progress of the low verbal children may remain or even become even more depressed.

A common technique used by teachers at every level of instruction is the question form known as interrogation. An interrogation is a question the questioner knows the answer to, and very often causes the respondent to try to determine what answer the questioner wants. While there is a place for interrogations (e.g. wanting to find out if a child knows his name and address, etc.), they tend to inhibit interaction, especially among children with low confidence in their communicative competence. Interrogations often make the respondent feel intimidated and defensive. What is required instead

is a question that solicits the child's views, opinions, preferences, hunches and ideas and probes and solicits his thinking on relevant matters. Note for example the difference between asking a child "What colour is your shirt?" versus "Is that the colour shirt you like best?". As H. & D. Wood point out "The way in which a teacher talks to young children helps to determine how active, forthcoming and competent they may appear" (1983, p. 160).

Another concept useful in considering "what not to do" is wait time. It has been shown in studies of teachers' classroom behavior (Peterson, 1982) that when soliciting information from pupils, the length of time they wait for a response varies as a function of how likely they think it is that the child knows the correct response. Thus a teacher waits longer for a reply to her question from an able child (who just happens to be slow on a given occasion) and gives up waiting for a child she believes unlikely to have the correct response much sooner. It is also possible that children acquire a sense of just how long a teacher will wait for them to respond and 'wait her out' just as long as it is necessary for her to give up on them and go on to another pupil. If young children pick up a sense of the 'wait time' allowed for them early, it may contribute to the recursive cycle such that the most competent communicators get the most of their teachers' verbal interaction because the less competent children know that the teacher will give up at a given time. In the case of children within a class from various cultural and linguistic communities these issues may be further complicated. As Saville-Troike points out

> Clear cross-cultural differences can and do produce conflicts or inhibit communication. For example, certain American Indian groups are accustomed to waiting several minutes in silence before responding to a question or taking a turn in conversations, while the native English speakers they may be talking to have very short time frames for responses or conversational turn-taking, and find silences embarrassing. (Saville-Troike, 1982)

Another common approach to teaching which may have inhibitory effects is that of treating language, words, sentences, etc. as the object of concern or focus in its own right. For young children, linguistic consciousness may be dysfunctional. It would seem more appropriate in the education of young children to treat language as a by-product of interaction, as inherent in activities or simply as a means for proceeding with other more important events in which communication is necessary for satisfaction or success. When children work on the kinds of projects described above, communication - typically through language - becomes necessary and useful, and ideally un-selfconscious.

Not uncommonly some adults try to bribe a reluctant child to speak. For example, a child who had never spoken in the nursery school class (though she was reported to participate normally in verbal give-and-take at home) was not allowed to have her juice or biscuits unless she asked for them out loud! This youngster "dug in her heels" preferring forfeiture of her refreshments to giving into a demand for

behaviour she evidently was unready to produce. Perhaps many children can be bribed into speaking. But this kind of manipulation would be neither a preferred nor necessary treatment. It would be preferable in the long run, to say to such a child something like "Maybe you don't feel like saying anything right now. That's alright. When you feel like it, just let me know and I'll be ready!" This should be said to the child in an easy-going and reassuring tone. Such a teacher response should help reduce the child's anxiety and free him or her to become involved in the life of the group.

How Can Practice Be Improved?

Efforts to change practices may be examined by asking what causes teachers to do what they do. This approach seeks to derive theories of practice rather than the more common approach which seeks to translate theory into practice. Answers to this question may be considered under three headings: a) teachers' understandings and misunderstandings of the phenomena under discussion, b) customs and traditions in practice, and c) institutional imperatives. These are discussed in turn below.

To alter understanding and misunderstandings of how children's commuicative competence is strengthened or inhibited requires insight rather than just information or simply new knowledge. The term insight is used here to refer to "a view below the surface" of a phenomenon. Information refers to pertinent facts, and knowledge implies groups of facts in conceptual form. Insight into how children's competence maybe

fostered is likely to be more difficult to acquire than is information and knowledge. The acquisition of insight may require extensive exposure to ideas and examples of relevant practices. Supervisors, advisors, and other resource personnel can help through the processes of insight-sharing as they observe teachers and students at work (see Katz, 1984a). However, inasmuch as all linguistic behavior is deeply rooted in an individual's own history and culture, and is largely and strongly habitual, mere intellectual knowledge of alternative ways of behaving may not be sufficient to cause lasting changes in behaviour.

Various kinds guided observation of appropriate practices and of the deleterious effects of those practices that inhibit communication among and with children may contribute somewhat to improving practice. It is generally not sufficient to simply observe in situ, or even to see films and tapes. Since verbal behaviour is deeply habitual and therefore largely unselfconscious, the assistance of an informed co-observer who offers cues and alerts the learner (whether student or teacher) to what to observe, and to what behaviours are related to each other is probably required for insight to occur. Similarly, some self-taping my also be used for self-observation, and an informed observer who provides cues and prompts about what to observe may also facilitate insight learning.

Practitioners may also be aided by becoming alert to how often they 'listen' to children half-heartedly, while being pre-occupied with their own urgent agendas. Such pre-occupation is natural and understandable. Nevertheless, children can be helped if the teacher 'practices' focussing on the child or the group of children with the

kind of concentration that would occur if one believed that nothing else on earth were happening! Needless to say, such concentration is difficult to maintain, and is bound to fluctuate. But without concentration important cues in the children's behaviour are likely to be missed and some children may perceive the preoccupation as disinterest.

Almost all teachers at every level can gain some insight into their own teaching by inviting appropriate observers such as colleagues to observe them at work. These observations can be followed up by discussion and exhanges of suggestions on particular problem cases and situations.

Customs and traditions may account for the very common use of the interrogatory style of interacting with children in schools. While interrogations may be useful in the more formal methods of teaching in the primary school, they are likely to be inhibiting to younger children. The long-standing custom of speaking to children in sweet and gentle tones is also not in the best interests of children, and is also likely to be employed by teachers unconsciously (Katz, 1977). Self-taping and other forms of consciousness-raising my help reduce its frequency. But the customs surrounding adult talk to children are likely to be slow in changing.

Among the most difficult institutional imperatives are those related to numbers. As long as educational institutions place children in relatively large group settings, teachers are confronted with problems in allocating their precious time in sufficient quanity to engage in

sustained and genuine interaction with individual and small groups of children. Another institutional imperative is that which presses teachers to 'cover' the curriculum and prepare their pupils for 'the next life'. To the extent that teachers feel it imperative to launch the young on academic preparation (at the expense of their intellectual development) practices that facilitate communicative competence may be difficult to implement. The evidence suggested by other papers in this issue indicates that young children benefit greatly from play and from interactions with each other and with adults in small informal groups in which their work and other activities are context-enriched and of real interest to them. Those with major responsibility for setting the goals and priorities for early childhood education can contribute much to improving practice by insisting on postponing formal teaching to at least the junior age range for most children. If formal teaching must be introduced before then, it seems best to provide it for relatively small portions of the school week (e. g. twenty minutes on three days only), and to encourage teachers to use intellectually enriched informal activities the rest of the time.

Many teachers report another imperative associated with school to be pressure from parents to get young children started on formal academic work as early as possible. As indicated above, it may be necessary to allocate some time during the week to address such parental expectations. As long as the remainder of the time is used well, children are unlikely to be harmed. There is a distinction between being sensitive to parents' expectations and capitulating to them. A sensitive response may be to offer some academic work for a small

proportion of the school week. Parental expectations are not easy to modify, especially at a time when efforts are being made to increase and strengthen parent's involvement in the schools.

Finally, for those responsible for preparing future teachers and working with inservice teachers, it might be useful to keep in mind that our students learn in many ways. Some learn from the illustrations, examples and anecdotes we present; some learn through trial and error; some learn through observation of teachers and children, and some learn through the model we ourselves provide as teachers. Ourselves as models is one teaching resource we do have control over! It would seem to be a good idea to teach our students in very much the same way we want them to teach others.

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